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Surprise Village Weaver

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In my brief four years as a recreational ringer, I have become acutely aware that one of the main attractions of this hobby is the ever-present anticipation of something unusual turning up in the nets. From my personal experience, catches of note would include a Marsh Warbler *Acrocephalus palustris* with a Belgian ring (whilst still training with George Viljoen), an African Red-eyed Bulbul *Pycnonotus nigricans* well out of its normal range, and a Dark-capped Bulbul *Pycnonotus barbatus* with an aberrant white primary. There have been many “specials” along the way and even some less welcome surprises in the form of a snake, a chameleon and several bats, not to mention the occasional large hole caused by unwelcome mammals.

On 2 October 2010, I was ringing at my son’s plot in Roodekopjes near Brits (25°37’S 27°44’E). Since there are about 30 chickens on the plot and seed is put out regularly, it’s not surprising that a good percentage of my catch at this site always consists of weavers and sparrows. In general, there are roughly equal numbers of Southern Masked-Weavers *Ploceus velatus* and Village Weavers *Ploceus cucullatus*, but on this occasion, the latter outnumbered the former by about 2 to 1.



I had already ringed 30 Village Weavers when I caught a particularly fine male which didn’t look normal. There was far too much black on the head, but in all other respects, it was still a Village Weaver. I processed him in the usual way and then dug out my copy of Roberts 7 from my car – yes, I do keep it with me in case of just the situation with which I was now presented. A quick read informed me that this weaver occurs

in two distinct forms in our region. The familiar South African form is *P. c. spilonotus*, whilst the more northerly form from Zimbabwe, etc, is *P. c. nigriceps* with the all-black head. The surprise was, of course, that I had caught an example of this latter sub-species so far south of its accepted range.

Following a flurry of e-mails in the following week, Peter Ryan confirmed that this was indeed unusual and he hadn’t heard of this sub-species being reported in South Africa. Rarities expert, Trevor Hardaker, indicated (Southern African Rare Bird News Report, 7 October 2010) that this form occasionally strays south of the Limpopo and has been reported at places like Pafuri, but never, to his knowledge, as far south as Brits.

Now, through this Afring News report and Trevor's regular newsletter, we are all waiting to hear if anyone else has seen this particular sub-species so far out of range.



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Editor's note:

Black-headed Village Weavers in South Africa

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There are a few records of Village Weavers with black heads in South Africa, published in bird club newsletters, where the records are easily overlooked over time. I observed a male *P. c. nigriceps* that was resident in a small colony along the Moreletaspruit in Pretoria in 1997 (Oschadleus 1997). Other records of are by Johan Knobel who observed a male in Lower Sabie in Kruger National Park in 1983 (Knobel 1984) and a sighting from Melrose Bird Sanctuary in Johannesburg (Anon. 1962).

The *nigriceps* individual caught by Alan Brooks appears to be the first one to be ringed in South Africa.

References

Anon. 1962. Melrose Bird Sanctuary. WBC News Sheet 41: 8

Knobel J, 1984. Gryskopmeeu, Witborskatakoeroe, Bontrugvinkie en Persweduweetjie in die Nasionale Kruger Park. Laniarius 21:24-25

Oschadleus D, 1997. Blackheaded race of the Spottedbacked Weaver. Laniarius 67:14